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SUBJECT: PROTESTANT BEATING: EMBASSY INVESTIGATES REPORT FROM THANH HOA

REF: HANOI 1520

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Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) On June 29 Poloff met with provincial, district and district police officials in Thanh Hoa Province to look into the alleged June 18 beating of un-registered Protestants by police in Thieu Vien Commune (reftel). Although some provincial officials attempted to pass off the beatings as the result of a fight between local citizens, our conversation with the police made it appear that at least security officials are concerned about the case, perhaps because of pressure from Hanoi. The provincial authorities invited the Embassy to return in a one or two months' time to hear the final police report on the incident. End Summary and Comment.

Provincial Officials Offer Explanation

2. (SBU) On June 29 Poloff traveled to Thanh Hoa Province to look into the local government's reaction to the report of beatings of Full Gospel Protestants in the province's Thieu Hoa District (reftel). Poloff met with Le Viet Bon, Deputy Chief of Staff for the provincial People's Committee (PPC), together with Bui Hai Vinh, Director of the province's Department of Religion and Ethnic Minority Affairs. On the subject of the June 18 incident, the officials noted that Nguyen Trung Ton, who presented evidence to Poloff that he had been beaten by police, claims to be an "unaffiliated" Protestant pastor and has been trying to convert or at least attract followers, although "he has never even attended a class on religion, much less received a degree." The Full Gospel Protestants under his tutelage "sometimes supposedly have prayer groups during lunchtime," but really "they are trying to make money," the officials flippantly suggested.

3. (SBU) Reminded by Poloff of the seriousness of the matter and the international attention it has received, one of the officials said, "it's a pity the incident took place." "We took a very clear approach: as soon as we learned of the incident, we asked the district officials to conduct an official investigation and to determine the appropriate punishment for the individuals involved," they continued. The provincial authorities resolved not to try to cover up anyone's guilt, and those found responsible will be punished according to the law, the director said.

4. (SBU) Referring to photographic evidence of the beatings posted on the internet and given to Poloff by Ton, Bon asserted that "these are pictures only and, given the available technology, things can be misleading, so we need to conduct an official investigation." Local authorities have confirmed that they asked four citizens to go to the police headquarters in Thieu Vien Commune, as reported to Poloff

by Ton. While they were there, some individuals lost control, and physical fighting occurred, but "this is not unusual." This incident was just a fight between individual citizens and should not be seen as institutional repression on religious activities, the officials asserted.

Thieu Hoa District

15. (SBU) Separately, Thieu Hoa District's Director of Religious Affairs noted that there are only two legal religions in the district: Catholicism and Buddhism. There are 1,500 Catholics in two sub-parishes, and 450 Buddhist with five temples. Although there are no official Protestant organizations in the district, the official acknowledged that "just recently, five individuals in Thieu Vien Commune claimed to be Protestant believers." The district's Protestants met several times without authorization, and district officials instructed them to cease. This group has never submitted a registration application, the official said. (Note: According to information from Ton, the group unsuccessfully attempted to register after being confronted by local officials. End Note.) The Director also said that the June 18 incident resulted from a fight between common citizens. "It is important that you do not turn this incident into a big thing ... the incident is not a sign of official repression of religion...fighting is something normal, which happens everyday in villages," he concluded.

16. (SBU) After this meeting, Poloff met with Lieutenant Colonel Le Nguc Duc, Chief of Police in Thieu Hoa District. Poloff passed reftel details and photographs to Duc and asked that he use them in his investigation of the June 18 incident. With some gravity, Duc said he "would use the information as further guidance for the police investigation and report." This investigation is still pending, nobody has been punished yet and no final conclusions or reports have been issued, he said. Nevertheless the initial investigation has confirmed that a fight broke out at the police station between Ton and his colleagues and "common citizens."

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Nonetheless, the police chief acknowledged that "there have been conflicting stories and documents relating what actually happened...that's why we have not issued our final conclusions yet."

Future Plans

17. (SBU) The Embassy team was unable to visit Thieu Vien Commune or the house church as originally planned. However, provincial officials agreed that Poloff should return to visit both locations and to hear the police chief's final report in late July or August.

Comment

18. (SBU) Although we are pleased that Thanh Hoa accepted our visit on only two days' notice, we are concerned that provincial level officials at first did not understand the seriousness of this issue. Hopefully that has changed. We note, however, the seriousness with which the district police chief treated the subject, possibly thanks to pressure from Hanoi to show results. On the positive side, the visit allowed an unusually frank exchange with local officials about a subject that is normally impossible for us to discuss.

Background: Thanh Hoa's Religious Demographics

19. (SBU) According to information provided by local officials, three religious organizations function legally in Thanh Hoa: the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) and the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS). The Thanh Hoa Catholic Diocese currently boasts 46 parishes, 305 sub-parishes, 56 priests, 1 bishop, 113 nuns, 36 seminarians, 35,000 Catholics followers and a monastery. There are over a hundred VBS temples in the province and 20,000 formally registered Buddhists, although many more Thanh Hoa

residents are practicing Buddhists. The VBS has established eight executive boards to govern Buddhist followers at the district level in the province. Five of these were established in the last year. Finally, there is one legal ECVN congregation, which was permitted to resume regular worship in late 2005 (see para 11).

¶10. (SBU) The officials noted that believers of all faiths have been permitted to study and learn about their religion in training classes conducted at their places of worship. Officials have also tried to facilitate religious festivals and ceremonies as required, and "all requests for activities have been processed promptly in a smooth and legal manner." The province has allowed new clergy to begin work in Thanh Hoa. In 2005-2006, ten Catholic priests were ordained in the province, and a further ten were ordained in Hanoi for service in Thanh Hoa. Fifteen VBS monks graduated from their training and many of them have been admitted for further study to Buddhist schools in Hanoi. The province is now examining a proposal to add 16 parishes to the diocese and has agreed to the construction of 15 new VBS temples. Since 1990, Thanh Hoa has also granted 20,000 square meters of land for use by the Catholic Church, the officials said.

¶11. (SBU) The officials noted that Protestants first appeared in the province as early as 1925. A single pastor took care of the Thanh Hoa ECVN congregation until 1986. (Note: This makes Thanh Hoa one of the 15 long-recognized ECVN congregations allowed by the GVN after 1964. End Note). After the pastor's death, Protestant numbers dwindled because "nobody took care of the church." In late 2005, the local authorities granted permission for the church to resume operations. In the six months since, "everything has been proceeding smoothly" as far as provincial authorities are concerned. The ECVN's new pastor has already successfully established an administration, executive board and has applied for land to construct a new church, the officials said.

¶12. (SBU) The provincial Department on Religion and Ethnicities has asked individual districts, communes and villages to provide better statistics about Protestant followers so that Thanh Hoa will eventually be able to conduct a pilot project to register all Protestants. That said, according to the officials, "what is disappointing for us is that some individuals, claiming to be pastors, have conducted activities for Protestants without our knowledge or approval."

MARINE